

My GTO Adventure

By Jeff Heinie

Before I begin, I would like to tell everyone this is not going to be a glamorous story. I did not know that trying to get a new “sports car” could be so complicated. I would also like to share that I am really not much of a car enthusiast. I like trains more than cars, but there has been a way for me to combine both worlds. I will say that my horizons expanded when I purchased my GTO.

I was residing in Quincy, IL at the time. My closest encounter with a “sports car” was owning a Chevy Lumina Z34 that I bought back in 1993. Since my home was in a neighborhood a few miles out of the city limits, I decided to trade that car for an SUV. I needed something with a 4-wheel-drive. After I paid off that vehicle, I decided to get a car and a truck. My parents wondered if I could afford payments on two vehicles. Being a pharmacist in the area, I did some careful planning. I had no problems finding a pickup truck. I found one at the local Chevy dealer that would suit my needs for hauling and still have 4-wheel-drive. Deciding on a car was a challenge. I wanted a fairly nice cruising coupe and checked all the models. There were a few that I liked more than others. When I discovered that the GTO was going to come back from Pontiac, I did not think twice about wanting one.

Now here is where the adventure begins. It was not as easy as it appeared. My parents also resided in Quincy and had a neighbor who was a car salesman at one of the local dealers. He actually helped me get my Chevy Blazer when I bought it in 1999. I asked him if he could assist me with getting the GTO. Since he was at the Chevy dealer, and this dealership dealt exclusively with that make, the salesman sent to the Pontiac dealer in Quincy to see one of his salesman buddies. I ventured over to the Pontiac dealer to see this salesman and told him that I wanted to get a GTO. He said he could order it for me. I chose the Metallic Blue color at the time and wanted an automatic transmission. I was then asked to provide a deposit, so I complied with his wishes. After getting the funds to the dealership, the waiting process began. I was hoping to have my car delivered to the car dealer showroom before Christmas. It would have been a nice gift to myself. I checked in at the car dealer periodically and was later told my car would be arriving in February. In the meantime, a letter arrived in the mail from Pontiac. It stated that I was going to be the owner of the new GTO once it came back. I had planned to keep the letter in the glove box of the car once I took delivery. That letter would have been a good selling point should I ever decide to part with the car. The month of February arrived, and I went back to the car dealer. On this visit, my salesman told me they were ready to build my car, but it was dropped from production. What?! I do not think he had any reasons or answers at the time. I then asked him to help me find a car. I did not know if it would be easy or not. My salesman thought maybe the car would eventually get built and possibly arrive in April. He could no guarantee anything. That is when I told the salesman in a little firmer voice to find me a car, or there was the possibility of visiting someone else.

On a previous car buying experience, I took my father with me. This time I was alone. I later told my father what was happening, and he said to tell the dealer to make them find me a car. I started to make some phone calls to Pontiac dealers in St. Louis and Chicago. When conversing with salespeople at these dealers, I was told that GTO's had arrived on their lots

about a month ago. Here is where another flag was raised. I tried telling my salesman where I discovered some GTO's on dealer lots. I decided on other colors and encouraged him to call these dealers and try to do a 'trade'. He did not seem to work too hard with me in this area and later said he did not want to call Chicago dealerships. I was later informed by him that a Black model was being delivered to the Quincy dealership, and that car would be their 'floor model'. I was given first choice to buy that model if I wanted. I ordered a Metallic Blue car and was not going to give up on it. Since tracking down that particular Blue model was becoming difficult to find, I settled on some other colors. The next challenge was getting a fellow Pontiac dealer to cooperate in a 'trade'. Dealers contacted by my Quincy salesman either did not have the car delivered yet or would not part with it if it was actually there. After several phone calls, the Pontiac dealer in Jacksonville, IL finally decided to help us and let me have the their 'floor model'. It was a Torrid Red car. The details regarding the 'trade' were arranged, and my salesman later called me to tell me that I would have a new GTO by the weekend. Most of this action happened on Friday. Later that day, I was called by the salesman who confirmed that I would have a GTO before the weekend came to an end. I had plans for the weekend, so I told him that I would pick up my car on Monday. A vehicle was chosen for the 'dealer trade', and my salesman personally went to Jacksonville to pick up my GTO. On my lunch break that following Monday, I finally drove my new GTO off the lot. My salesman complimented that he never drove a smoother driving car. Now I am sure everyone has received the survey from the manufacturer when he/she buys a new vehicle. I received one later and decided to share the truth with General Motors on this one. I indicated my feelings and submitted a formal letter along with the survey to GM. I stated in the end that I was happy to finally have my new GTO but not satisfied with the events that transpired. Someone from General Motors must have seen my letter and attempted to contact me. I never did reach him. All we did was play 'phone tag'. I think he wanted to offer me something for free. Once this 'adventure' was completed, I vowed and told GM that I would never order a new vehicle again. Since then, I have stuck to my guns. Now I ask, shouldn't people who placed orders for a new car been given priority? It did not seem so in this case.

Since getting the GTO, my horizons have expanded. My father encouraged me to go to cruise-ins. I started off by visiting the car gatherings in Quincy and then traveling to other communities to park and show my car. One of my railroad clubs in Chatham, IL decided to host a cruise-in on year in conjunction with a particular celebration one year. Since then, that event keeps happening and growing.

Someone later asked me if there were any clubs devoted to GTO owners. I did not know at the time. My parents belonged to a Corvette club in Quincy, so there had to be some GTO clubs somewhere. After having my car for a couple years, I decided to research the subject. I discovered two clubs in IL and also found the group in the St. Louis area. Since I was in Central IL, I decided to join the Heart of IL GTO club. My friendship circle expanded at that time.

While a member of the HOIGTO club, I participated in quite a number of interesting and fun events. I attended a couple of picnics. My car went for a drive on historic US66 from Lincoln to Pontiac, IL with some other members one autumn. I even organized an event myself and invited members to go on a Mississippi River drive. Several of us drove down to Louisiana, MO on the IL side and then had brunch at the Eagle's Nest Bistro. Afterwards, we took in some sights along the river. Heading back toward Quincy, we drove the highway on the MO side. We

made one last stop to view the river from Lover's Leap. I even traveled to Clinton, IL a few times to dine with club members at Ted's Garage restaurant.

In the summer of 2009, the GTO and I went on vacation together. I decided that year to visit Nebraska. On my agenda were plans to see different railroad landmarks. During my planning, I discovered interstate highway speeds were 75 mph. If I was going to cruise at that speed, I decided to do it in something meaningful. What better way to put the GTO through some paces. I stayed in Grand Island and ventured to different places each day. One day, I traveled out to North Platte to see Union Pacific's Bailey Yard. To get there, I took Interstate 80 and was able to cruise the highway at 80 mph! After spending the day at the Golden Spike Visitors Center, I headed back to Grand Island. I decided to take my time and chose US30 to travel back. The highway parallels the railroad almost all the way across the state, so here I was able to chase and pace trains. It was not a dull trip.

I can not believe it has been ten years since I drove that GTO off the car dealer lot. The car has gone on various weekend road trips with me. I have also attended numerous cruise-ins and gatherings. It has traveled on US66 in IL about three times and helped me chase a few trains. Everything on the car is still original, but the tires were replaced several years ago. As of right now, I do not plan to part with it. I hope we have a long future together.



My new GTO a few days after delivery from the car dealer.



At the Loco-Motion Cruise-in at the Chatham Railroad Museum. The event was hosted by the C&IM Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society.



Attending a cruise-in with the Midwest Cruisers car club at Hooter's in Peoria, IL.



Attending a picnic with the HOI GTO club in McLean, IL.



An all Pontiac car show at S&K Pontiac in Springfield, IL with the HOI GTO club. Car sales people were the judges for this event.



I always liked to take a shot after my annual 'spring cleaning' of the car.





At the annual meeting with HOI GTO's at Dick Levi's in Springfield, IL.



Cruising on US Highway 30 in Nebraska chasing trains. The Union Pacific mainline paralleled the highway.



With HOI GTO cruising US66 from Lincoln, IL to Pontiac, IL. I think Randy and Carol Henderson are ahead of me in that '65 GTO.



Several of us in the HOI GTO club gathered and did a Mississippi River cruise. Here are some of us gathered at a spot on the bluff of the river in Louisiana, MO.



At the mural in Pontiac, IL.



Cruising US 66 on Memorial Day in 2013. Parked at the nostalgic gas station in Odell, IL.